

Onlife Migrants and Digital Inclusion. Reflections for a Sociology of Digital Migrations

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Migration is a global phenomenon and can present different characteristics and trends, as well as multiple reasons for its origin, linked for example to political, economic, war, climatic or cultural factors. Public discourse on migrants is often fuelled by prejudices and stereotypes with sometimes important consequences, such as episodes of misinformation or verbal violence, transmitted in digital format, with a high percentage of sharing and diffusion. However, scientific literature in the social sciences is still scarce, as is the attention of institutions and media to the “digital dimension” of the migration phenomenon. The new electronic-digital media are increasingly interconnected environments used to build and share information, also in the field of migration. Consequently, it is necessary to scientifically investigate this aspect and to know the languages and communication modes of “digital migrants” (cybermigrants), in order to manage technological risks and their new virtual identities, beyond any form of surveillance. Onlife is the term coined by philosopher Luciano Floridi to represent the new human condition in the digital age. A dimension that can also be identified in the migration phenomenon: migrants are not only the subject of journalistic narratives, but they live connectedly and actively participate in the spaces of the net. For these reasons, and others that will be presented here, through the study and analysis of the international literature, we would like to try to think of a new social science: the “sociology of digital migrations”.

Keywords: cybermigration, digital media, identity, technological risk, multiculturalism, surveillance

Introduction

The technological revolution is of considerable importance for those who live geographically dispersed, and the international migration sector has been most affected.

The numerous global positioning applications, messaging platforms and social networks are now configured as media environments, “places of habitation”, to carry out or even just structure a migration project (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012).

Migrants are in fact an integral part of the digital society, who have gone from being victims/objects of media representation to being generators and consumers of media content on the internet, possessing various communication tools, and independently searching for and managing online information (Diminescu, 2005; Kymlicka, 2012).

The “digital availability” of migrants has been repeatedly criticized by the national and local press because they are busy taking selfies or documenting their arrival.

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Thus, the possession of a digital tool does not so much indicate the socio-economic status of the migrant, but rather the migrant's need to always be connected; moreover, it is now, as pointed out by the British online newspaper *The Independent* (O'Malley, 2015), a commodity within reach of almost all social classes in terms of cost. Refugees, for example, who come from relatively affluent countries, migrate with their smartphones, which are already a medium in their previous daily lives.

Information and connectivity, unlike some clichés still found in the daily press, are by no means to be regarded as “luxury goods”, but as basic necessities. The latter are necessary to satisfy important needs, in addition to the primary ones, such as having correct information and being able to establish communication (Gillespie et al., 2016; Connor, 2017).

In their condition, social and digital technologies become true “survival technologies” that underpin the maintenance of personal identity and in some way support the entire journey, allowing them to maintain social and family ties.

All phases of the migration project and the daily life of an immigrant, even once he or she has arrived in the host country, are characterized by a digital infrastructure that deserves to be explored in depth.

For a long time, scientific literature has described international migration as a radical and traumatic phenomenon (Achotegui, 2005) responsible for the breakdown of social ties and relations with the community of origin.

Communication technologies, besides being a necessity, assume a further important value, that of “community technologies”, virtual environments capable of connecting socially, cognitively and emotionally geographically dispersed subjects, creating and maintaining transnational networks, information communication (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2016; Connor, 2017).

For migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter Europe, not only traditional infrastructures (railways, ports, etc.) are important, but also electronic-digital infrastructures such as smartphones, apps, simultaneous translation programmes, messaging platforms, and social networks.

It is these tools that facilitate and support the organization of the journey and the whole migratory experience of the “new connected migrants”, but the security issue should not be underestimated: the unconscious use of devices can determine, as we will see later, different levels of “technological risk”.

Social-Digital Capital and Migration

Migrant networks, created and supported mainly by social media, can be interpreted as a set of ties and relations that we can distinguish as: “strong” ties, as they are mainly based on kinship or a shared community of origin; “weak” or “dispersed” ties, because once they leave their country, relations are less binding than traditional ones and embrace different social groups; and “new ties”, as, thanks to the web, the available information capital widens considerably. The digital dimension within migrant networks drives the shift from an “asynchronous-punctual” to a “synchronous-diffuse” type of communication.

For a long time, many economists described the decision to migrate as a simple economic calculation (how much money a family was earning at home compared to what they could make abroad by migrating), rather than investigating the role of family, social and media relations.

In addition to large-scale processes, such as climate change, poverty or conflict, the possibility to see (and go) beyond one's own border thanks to the interactive and transparent nature of new media and the possibility to build a constant connection/relationship with other migrants outside one's family and community, has

pushed many to move and choose their destination in a selective, informed, and reasoned way, following the path suggested, through digital platforms, by those who have already reached that specific destination (Gillespie et al., 2016; Cusimano & Mercatanti, 2017).

On the basis of what has been described, taking up the thought of sociologist Bourdieu, one could recognize, within migrants' networks, a sort of "such social-digital heads", i.e. resources represented, on the one hand, by individuals' relational networks that are born and strengthened within digital spaces and, on the other, by those migrants (in this specific case) who invest much of their time online, consuming media content and accumulating knowledge and skills (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; De Feo & Pitzalis, 2015).

Considering what has been described so far and taking as reference studies already conducted on the subject (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2016), it was possible to identify the concept of "social and digital capital" (digital social relations with and in platforms; use of websites and web spaces to inform/educate oneself), within the migration process, in four "functions" in the relationship identified between the migration phenomenon and new media:

- Maintenance of the personal network (strong ties);
- Strengthening of the personal network (weak ties);
- Activation of the personal network (new ties);
- Open source information space.

The first three functions relate to: activation, re-activation, and maintenance of the social-digital capital; the fourth refers to the information infrastructure of the new media that allow the search for news and the possibility to be educated and informed on the net.

Geographically dispersed migrants try, by all means, to maintain direct contact with their personal family/friendly network through digital, synchronous communication, which allows them to feel close and see each other without space-time limits.

There are now numerous platforms or applications that allow this and many of these are used by the sample interviewed for different purposes.

Skype, for example, is an instant messaging programme that offers the possibility to chat, make phone calls, exchange files, and save conversations for free through a peer-to-peer system. This platform was created in 2003 in Estonia by Jaan Tallin, Ahi Heinla, and Pit Kasesal and is now one of the most widely used dial-up communication systems in the world and also plays a crucial role for migrants. Others are used to contacting their friends and relatives who have remained in their country of origin using Skype at times, but prefer to use Vi-ber as a "safer" medium.

The issue of security is central to the migration process as it then influences the choice of platform to be used to digitally support the journey.

As far as strengthening one's network of contacts is concerned, the most widely used digital devices are WhatsApp and Facebook, both of which are easily activated by connecting them to one's phonebook, are free of charge and work with active internet or wi-fi.

Facebook, in particular, allows the migrant to keep in constant touch with distant friends and relatives, as well as with acquaintances in the area and to be updated on their condition by viewing photos and messages posted on their personal wall or simply by scrolling through the information that normally appears on the timeline of each individual user "friend".

At the same time, it becomes a reference platform to have a “world view in a few seconds” through reading news (supported by the use of automatic translators), following the pages of singers or actors famous in their countries of origin, clicking on a few articles in Italian concerning issues that have particularly affected them or characters they have heard about from peers and operators.

In addition to strengthening or rebuilding old contacts, social networks allow them to get in touch with unknown people, even of different nationalities and especially already present in the destination country, who tell their stories and life experiences in online groups (see Table 1).

Table 1

Social Media and Migration Network

Analysis dimensions	Type of communication	Medium used
Maintaining the personal network	Synchronous, digital and real communication	Skype, WhatsApp
Strengthening their contacts both in the new country and in the territory of origin	Creating chain contacts	Facebook (role of the algorithm*)
Activation of the personal network	Building interpersonal relationships	Facebook (virtual community training*)
Access to free open source information space	Search news and personal contacts	Means of information, public data, media files

Onlife Socialization and Technological Risks

The all virtual, onlife described so far is a form of socialization, inspired by principles of solidarity and mutual aid. These social, emotional and cognitive ties take place mainly in a digital space and are characterized by the network of “digital migrants”, trust and a high level of “ethnic solidarity”.

The web and social media are open and interconnected spaces, and thus promote constant contact with friends and family, reducing the level of cultural shock caused by the, often, sudden departure and abandonment of family members for economic or political reasons.

The constant use of new information and communication technologies in the field of migration can have positive aspects, aimed at improving social inclusion paths or relations between immigrants and local communities, but also negative phenomena such as social-digital marginalization and digital smuggling are examples.

Communication is a fundamental need for the “digital migrant”, which can also affect their state of health: the absence of prolonged contact with their families of origin, as well as waiting for a job, is an issue that should not be underestimated.

There is a risk that the processes of marginalization will, over time, generate in the migrant serious cases of psychological suffering, aggression, and self-harm.

These behaviours are often added to the presence of often invisible wounds, traumas that appear slowly and bring to mind the violence suffered, the drama of a risky journey, the death of friends and family members (Achotegui, 2005; IOM, 2019).

In addition to the many possible traumas, there is another issue that is present throughout the migration journey and is too often underestimated by the competent authorities. Regardless of the route, country of origin and destination, those who decide to migrate run the risk of running into the racket of human traffickers who, in most cases, decide the time, cost, and method of a journey that is very often improvised.

The traffickers' network covers more than one hundred countries: in 2015, the business of trafficking in immigrants amounted to 6 billion dollars and the average per capita cost of an illegal journey from Africa or Asia to the Old Continent ranges from 3,000 to 10,000 dollars.

The United Nations defines trafficking in persons as an organized criminal activity that takes place across national borders and consists of the recruitment, transportation, transfer, or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or abuse of power. This is done by receiving payments or benefits to obtain the consent of a person who has control over another person, for the purpose of exploiting the prostitution of others or other forms such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, or slavery including the removal and sale of organs.

Traffickers run this lucrative business, today also making use of the latest available technologies to conceal their criminal activities; the success of the net has therefore not only provided quick access to information for our world, but also suggested faster and more efficient ways to operate organized crime; according to the FBI, in 84.3% of cases traffickers use the internet for migrant trafficking and sexual exploitation, advertising victims to clients on real platforms (Europol, 2016).

Digital smugglers therefore do not only provide support for the migration journey (an operation that can be traced back to the figure of the so-called "smuggler"), they do not trade human beings (human trafficking), but expose services and "travel packages" on the dark web.

Since 2015, organized crime has made extensive use of false identity documents, allowing many illegal immigrants to present themselves as fake asylum seekers.

Once the terms of the operation were agreed upon, in a few weeks any person of Albanian or Kosovar origin (at risk of being rejected at the EU gates because they were not victims of war and did not come from countries in conflict) could try to enter Europe. These services were mostly obscure and required a good dose of trust from those who decided to rely on them (Schiesaro, 2018).

Human traffickers are actively using both surface and dark networks to run their crimes in both selling and recruiting victims, while efforts are being made to combat human trafficking at the beginning of cybercrime, there is still much work to be done.

Rethinking new strategies in terms of social policies, communication and management of migration flows, trying to counter the major problem of organized crime that is now also present in online environments, is a further major challenge in addition to those already identified, but which can be tackled more effectively thanks to digital technology.

However, this requires further understanding of the situation, the development of technology, the training of those involved and governmental cooperation at a global level.

Migrant Identities and New Digital Identities

Globally about one billion people have no identity documents. Regarding possible international institutional cooperation and the creation of new security and migration policies, an interesting aspect has emerged in recent years that connects the issue of migrants' identities with that of data and possible digital traces. In Europe and other countries around the world, the migration discourse still creates enormous public debate and conflict between institutions and citizens. In spite of this, there has been discussion for a few years now about adding new digital identity systems that would promote a more effective and collaborative migration policy.

What is needed is a knowledge base on the technical and bureaucratic dangers, the difficulties of defending privacy and obtaining full and informed consent, and the challenges of identity data protection for all actors in the ecosystem. Institutions and stakeholders can use this knowledge to ensure that adequate technical and organizational safeguards are in place before digital identity systems are developed, implemented, and integrated (Data & Society, 2019).

Only then can we realize the benefits of trusted socio-technical systems and, at the same time, protect the fundamental rights of vulnerable and marginalized populations. The new challenge for institutions today is to manage, also digitally, the phenomenon of international migration.

In fact, it is with digital technology that the UN intends to resolve some of the issues surrounding international migration: by creating a global system by 2030 that will be able to provide a legal identity to every inhabitant of the planet, with the help of companies such as Accenture and Microsoft. The migration policies applied so far have brought poor results in terms of social and cultural integration (Kymlicka, 2012; Buoncompagni & D'Ambrosi, 2020; Buoncompagni, 2021).

This project, which falls within the framework of the objectives set out in the Agenda for Sustainable Development, aims to allow anyone to access their personal information through a new platform on cloud computing connected to the existing public or private systems of the various countries.

This would mean a “digital revolution” in migration: no more passports, identity cards, birth certificates, or paper documents proving citizenship or asylum status. Everyone would be able to prove who they are and where they come from by providing proof of their legal existence, or have access to medical, banking, and educational data, by connecting, wherever they are, to a universal digital network accessible via app and mobile phone.

For the UN High Commissioner, identity, including digital identity, a basic human need and right in the interconnected society, is a fundamental human right without which one is excluded from access to basic health, education, and banking services (UNHCR, 2018).

Digital infrastructure could support those most in need, refugees and displaced persons, in the future in receiving the resources and medical care they need. And, once authenticated on the global network, confirm in front of any authority and agency their main data such as birth, citizenship, or level of education (Data & Society, 2019).

But these same technologies can also lead to unintended dangers. Migrants may face social stigma or xenophobia in host communities, leading to special privacy and security concerns. Like other marginalized groups, migrants may also be excluded, or actively avoided, from social support systems if they feel they are being monitored through technology. For migrants, however, who seek access to even the most basic resources, the price to pay often involves handing over information about their identity, which calls into question the principle of voluntary, informed consent.

In Europe, the collection of identity data is governed by numerous policies, which create huge power differentials between governments and migrants with implications in areas such as social protection, privacy and consent. In recent years, the EU has sought to limit both the number of migrant arrivals and the number of those who can avail themselves of residence permits. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), although the total number of arrivals in Europe has decreased since the climax by more than one million in 2015, Europe remains the world's most dangerous destination for irregular migrants (IOM, 2019).

In the public discourse, we often talk about “massacres by sea”: we count today many deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, people fleeing but did not make it. They are about 3,771 in 2015, 5,143 in 2016, and 3,139 in 2017 as highlighted by Human Rights Watch which noted the absence of safe humanitarian corridors for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as policies to limit arrivals and outsource responsibilities to regions and countries outside the EU (HRW, 2016).

For example, the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosur) manages surveillance of the Mediterranean Sea using drones and satellite tools, extending physical borders outwards, identifying only “illegal” migrants on boats and trying to prevent them from reaching EU shores.

For those arriving on European territory, the EU has developed several large-scale complex computer systems for digital identification. The European Fingerprinting System (Eurodac) collects biometric data and manages its database (Data & Society, 2019). Fingerprints are requested from migrants upon arrival, when they cross internal borders and potentially during any possible contact with a police or border official.

The border is pushed further into each EU country and then “incorporated” by asylum seekers. No informed consent is required to use Eurodac and border officials are authorized, if necessary, to use physical or psychological coercion to obtain fingerprints from adult migrants. Eurodac was proposed as a policy to be applied to minors, but was opposed by a number of UN member states and international organizations. The European Commission reduced the minimum age for biometric collection from 14 years to 6 years for unaccompanied minors and extended the duration of data retention from 18 months to 5 years.

One of the most significant policies affecting refugees is the “Dublin Regulation”, which defines the process for collecting data from asylum seekers in Europe. The EU Regulation No. 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council requires member states to examine every application for international protection made by a third-country national or stateless person on their territory, which means that identity data are often collected where the applicant first applied for international protection in a member state.

This means that fingerprints are taken in the first country of arrival in the EU, which automatically becomes the country where a refugee should apply for asylum and stay until that application is accepted. However, many asylum seekers do not wish to remain in the first country of entry, often Greece and Italy, but seek to transit to other destinations in Western and Northern Europe, living in fear of being tracked down and sent back to the first country of arrival (Reidy, 2017).

Migrants entering Europe and seeking asylum protection have the right to receive understandable information about the collection of their data and the procedures used for this purpose. However, this does not necessarily mean obtaining meaningful informed consent before undertaking data collection. The member state in which a migrant seeks protection must provide information on the objectives and purposes of the regulation, which requires that this information is provided in a language the asylum seeker understands. However, it is not so clear whether migrants are in a position to fully understand the legal information provided to them.

These challenges present a worrying trend, particularly in Europe, where the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has enshrined the key point of data protection laws: there must be a legal basis for the collection of a natural person’s data, and all such activities are subject to the law. Legal requirements include informed consent and the right to understand the logic behind the data collection process and the consequences of automated decisions.

But if the authorities collecting personal data are not able to provide, in plain language, an explanation of the right to protection of one’s own data, they remain incomplete. Moreover, GDPR procedures do not

explicitly address how personal data should be collected in a migration context. Indeed, the GDPR applies to any entity that collects and processes the personal data of any person residing in the EU.

It is therefore evident, that there is a lack of a coherent policy guiding the use of ID technologies by other actors, such as international organizations and the aforementioned NGOs, who identify, monitor, or provide services to migrants. Although there are some regulations at EU level, such as the Dublin Regulation and the GDPR, the exact way in which member states implement these rules may differ. Any organization that seeks to help, monitor, serve or otherwise interact with migrants may comply with these laws differently, thus offering a very different margin of help to migrants (Data & Society, 2019).

Conclusions

Onlife migrants therefore relate, plan, move, and take risks in virtually connected spaces as well as by land and sea.

Today, governments and others should unambiguously implement a well-designed and comprehensive digital identity system to help migrants integrate into social systems such as healthcare or housing.

NGOs are also an important part of the digital identity ecosystem. Organizations that collect data have a wide variety of data accountability practices. Before organizations implement consent forms, they and the authorities need to be clear with migrants and themselves about what data they are collecting, why it is being collected, for how long, how it is being used, and what the risks are. Social media and other technology companies are involved in collecting migrant and refugee data.

Working towards reliable systems can provide an answer to the dilemma of weighing the trade-offs between risks and dangers. For any digital identity system to work, trust must be achieved between both data holders and data subjects, but in the case of migrants and refugees, there are good reasons for a lack of trust between the parties. Some migrants actively avoid interacting with government services for fear that data collection will impose increasingly harsh and discriminatory policies on migrants and refugees in Italy. While migrants continue to use social media and mobile technologies, they may also be wary of data collected by open source platforms (UNHCR, 2018; IOM, 2019).

So there is a need instead for a new knowledge based on the reality of bureaucratic and technical harm, the difficulties of maintaining privacy and obtaining free and fully informed consent, and the challenges of protecting identity data in the ecosystem.

Institutions and stakeholders can use this knowledge to ensure that adequate technical and policy safeguards are in place before digital identity systems are developed and deployed to address migration and refugee management and protect the fundamental rights of vulnerable and marginalized populations.

There are still pressing issues to be explored and tested before imposing new digital identity systems in the current migration context. Without specific legislation on the subject, applied to the migration context, and without a stronger scientific and technical evidence base and appropriate safeguards, new digital identity systems could amplify the risks and damage to the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in Europe and around the world.

Making what has been said so far even more topical is the analysis carried out by Shoshana Zuboff (2019), who describes the structures of the new form assumed by capitalism in the time of the network and large computer platforms, which, on the basis of what has been explained above, fully involves the phenomenon of migration.

But surveillance capitalism is not a technology: it is a logic that permeates technology and transforms it into action.

Surveillance capitalism is a form of market which is unimaginable outside the digital context, but it does not coincide with the needs of the migrant and his digital life.

Therefore, what we tried to do in the paper was to outline the main lines of a new sociology of migration: a sociology of digital migration. A “new” discipline that includes three essential points: the digital social capital of the mobile foreigner, the virtual identity of the migrant, and the technological risks of the connected migrant.

The (cyber)immigrant (Buoncompagni, 2021) is today the real active subject within the connected public space, in constant contact with family members, institutions and the unfortunate world of illegality. Here is a new critical look, therefore, to analyze the migratory phenomena in the network society, beyond the media representation of the foreigner, of an “other than me”, who today plans his life onlife.

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